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RURAL LIFE IN THE SOUTH.*

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Down South we know about political reconstruction—somewhat. We do not know so much about the economic reconstruction the Southern States have been undergoing these last fifty years. We ought to know more about the economic causes, drifts, and tendencies that have been making and shaping our history the last half-century. Their significance reaches fatefully into our future. An ounce of sound economics is worth more to us now than a whole ton of partisan politics.

It took the South twenty years to get back into use farm land equal to the cultivated area of 1860, and another twenty years to recover her farm values in full—a long, bewildering period of readjustment, hardship and struggle in our farm regions. And thus in 1900 the rural South began again, forty years late, with a total gain of only 4 per cent. in her farm values, against 156 per cent. for the whole country during this period. But in the next ten years, the South doubled her farm values. One state nearly trebled them, while all of the Southern States ran well ahead of the average for the entire country, except in farm machinery. This economic reconstruction of the rural South may well be called the greatest event of its sort in history.

Look at the changed conditions. Farm labor passed from compulsion into freedom of contract, and farm owners from wealth and comfort into poverty and distress. The half million plantations of 1860 (in the old South east of the Mississippi) were broken into small farms, two million in number. One million of these are now cultivated, or, as Henry Wallace says, are “mined” by tenants, one third of them being cash tenants and two thirds, share tenants. The other million farms are cultivated by owners, four fifths white and one fifth black. Such in brief, and in round numbers, is Doctor Coulter’s exhibit of the revolutionary changes in the land

* Discussion of Doctor Coulter’s paper on “The Rural South,” Washington, D. C., December 28, 1911.

tenure and farm labor systems of the South during the half century.

When you consider that in the recent census decade Southern cotton growers created a wealth greater, by more than a billion dollars, than the output of the gold and silver mines of the entire world during this period, you will agree, perhaps, that here are marvels of patience and power as well as marvels of soil and climate.

There is no longer any doubt about the industrial future of the South. It is just as wonderful as Abram S. Hewett and Judge Kelley long ago predicted. But the agricultural possibilities are just as wonderful. The opportunities for development that Doctor Knapp and Secretary Wilson have written about so often and so spiritedly are here, in very truth.

Doctor Coulter shows that we have comfortable room for twice the present number of farmers. May I add that the winters are short and mild. Water and timber are everywhere abundant. The range and variety of soil and climate make diversified farm activities possible and profitable. The South, not the Middle West, is the native home of the corn plant. Our boys in the Corn Clubs easily raise a hundred bushels to the acre, at a cost of less than 25 cents per bushel. Yields of more than 200 bushels to the acre are fairly common. And as yet we have barely touched the possibilities of fruit and truck farming, stock breeding, and cattle growing. The South is indeed a land of promise.

But Doctor Coulter also shows that the bulk of farm tenancy in this country is in the South, where the farms cultivated by renters average one in every two—in Georgia and Mississippi, nearly two in every three; that farming by tenancy is rapidly increasing in Southern farm regions; and that as land values rise the tenant's chance to own his farm is a dwindling ratio.

It augurs ill for Georgia and Mississippi that, in the last thirty years, the farms cultivated by owners dropped from fifty-four and fifty-five, to thirty-four in the hundred in both states. The extent and the increase of farm tenancy in the South are alarming. In fifteen counties of Georgia, from 80

to 91 per cent. of the farms are operated by tenants; and in twenty counties of Mississippi from 80 to 96 per cent.

No efficient, satisfying rural civilization can be built upon farm tenancy and absentee landlordism. The effect of excessive farm tenancy upon country schools and churches is disastrous. The other day I stood in a country school in one of the best counties in Georgia. Twenty-one of the twenty-eight children were in this school this year for the first time. They were children of tenant farmers. The personnel of the attendants upon the school and the nearby church undergoes kaleidoscopic changes like this every year or two.

It is the same old story everywhere in regions abandoned to tenant farming. In the very nature of things these transient, migratory people lack abiding interest in progressive community enterprises and agencies. Farm tenancy alone largely explains the high illiteracy ratios of the Southern States. Many of these tenant farmers are industrious, law-abiding, good people, and a week's wage will still buy an acre of land in many counties of the South; nevertheless they crave freedom to move at sweet will and pleasure more than they crave farm and home-ownership.

Another significant economic tendency in the Southern farm life is exhibited in the paper under discussion. It is the fact that Negroes are resisting the lure of city life and sticking to the farm better than the whites. In every Southern state, except Kentucky, the white farmers are a lessening ratio. On the contrary, the Negro farmers in the South, except in Florida, Louisiana, and Texas, are a growing ratio. In South Carolina and Alabama the Negro population on the farm grew in the last census decade nearly twice as fast as the Negro population in general in these two states; more than twice as fast in Mississippi, and three and a half times as fast in Georgia.

On the other hand, there is the steady drift of white farm owners and white tenants cityward; the first for business opportunities and social advantages, and the last for work in the mills and factories. Thus the growth of urban population in Georgia was three and a half times, and in Mississippi it was five times, the growth of rural population. Negroes rent the vacated farms and remain in the country, and oftentimes

they move back into the country from the towns—a thing seldom true of the whites. Thus there are fourteen Mississippi counties in which the Negro farmers outnumber the white farmers five to one; in four of them, more than twenty-five to one; in one of them, nearly thirty to one.

And I may add, that the Negro is fast rising out of tenancy into ownership. In ten counties of Mississippi the farms cultivated by Negro owners outnumber the farms cultivated by white owners. But the increasing ownership of farms by Negroes throughout the South is a conspicuous fact, even when they are thinly scattered in white communities. The fact appears so uniformly upon the county tax digests in that it has ceased to be surprising. It means, of course, that the Negro is working out his own salvation upon an economic basis. It may be that he is traveling along a hard, difficult road; but in simple truth there seems to be no other way.

Doctor Coulter's paper closes with a look into the future, in a series of inquiries. They are tremendously important, but who can answer them with assurance? And yet exactly these questions have been answered in the course of history, in other states and countries.

Those of us who are struggling with the country life problem in the South believe that the culture of the farmer is more important than the farmer's agriculture; and that the farmer's home and children are more precious than the farmer's fields and crops.

Here are important questions that we face daily. Will the new industrial city civilization of the South bring about depletion and decay in our rural regions, as it has done elsewhere in America? Are we doomed to a one-crop civilization based on tenancy farming? Will the apparently permanent high prices of food stuffs tempt us into diversified farming? Or must the business of the South be repeatedly paralyzed by low-priced cotton before we can give ourselves to diversified farm activities? Or will we wait to take our lesson from the boll weevil, as Louisiana and Texas have done? Who can say?

One of the characters in Mrs. Abbott's new book, "*The Sick-a-Bed Lady*," says: "Up to the time he's thirty, no man has done the things he wants to do, but only the things that have

happened to come his way. He is forced into business to please his father, and cajoled into the Episcopal Church to please his mother, and bullied into red neckties to please sister Isabel. But having once reached the grown-up, level-headed, utterly independent age of thirty, a man's a fool who doesn't sit down deliberately and list out, one by one, the things that he wants and go ahead and get them."

Now, the South is grown-up, and level-headed enough to sit down and deliberately list out the things she needs for permanent well-being. She needs, first and most of all, to preserve sanely and safely the balance between her country life and her industrial civilization. To this end, she needs improved public highways, cross-country trams and telephones, modern conveniences and comforts in her country homes, applied science and labor-saving machinery on her farms, and new ideals and activities in her country schools and churches. But she must realize that none of these are possible to a civilization based upon landless, homeless, ignorant, unskilled labor; that civilization is bottomed on the home-owning, home-loving, home-defending instinct; and that her economic salvation depends upon a multiplied host of small farmers who till the land that they own, and own the land that they till. True, we can not go ahead and get all these things in a jiffy; but we can struggle toward these ends with fervent love of our motherland and with unyielding hope and courage.

The South has bravely set her hand to her task. Her agricultural colleges are achieving wonders. Her teacher training schools have been forced into a study of the country-life problems; because, population considered, the country school bulks big. It is 83 per cent. of the whole problem of public education in the South. Here, if anywhere in the world, ought to be really efficient courses in rural economics and sociology, in the colleges and universities. We shall doubtless have them in good time. In any event I dare to say that the South is not a "Sick-a-Bed Lady," but a strong man, ready and rejoicing to run a race.